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Firm May Dump Radioactive Waste In S. Utah Mine

By Jim Woolf
THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

For the first time in Utah, an abandoned uranium mine in San Juan County may become a disposal site for mildly radioactive wastes.

Molycorp, a New Mexico-based subsidiary of Unocal, wants to backfill the Small Fry Mine with 20,000 cubic yards of radioactive waste from an old vanadium-processing plant. Vanadium is an element used in the production of steel alloys. It is found in Utah along with uranium and other radioactive elements.

The Small Fry Mine is located about 25 miles northeast of Monticello. The 2-acre pile of vanadium waste is located about nine miles south of the mine. The vanadium ore was removed from other mines in the area.

If the project is approved by the state, this would be the first time a Utah mine has been authorized for the disposal of radioactive wastes, said Larry Anderson, director of the Utah Division of Radiation Control.

It also could set a precedent for the future use of other abandoned

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uranium mines in southeastern Utah, Mr. Anderson conceded. But he said the details of the Molycorp situation are "really different" and not likely to occur again soon.

"We'll have to face that if it happens," he said.

Stuffing its waste in a mine was not the company's only option. The Envirocare of Utah landfill in Tooele County was designed to accept mildly radioactive waste. That landfill surrounds the spot where the radioactive Vitro uranium mill tailings from Salt Lake County were buried. The Vitro tailings are about three times more radioactive than the Molycorp waste.

Gary Morris, an environmental geologist for Unocal, said company officials considered shipping the waste to Envirocare, but decided it would be too expensive.

He said the mine offers a "unique solution" to his company's waste-disposal problem. The benefits:

- The vanadium waste is less radioactive than rock in the mine's wall, so there is no increase in the level of radiation.
- The mine is above the water table so there is little risk of groundwater contamination.
- The waste will be isolated permanently from the public.
- The mine will be sealed at the end of the project.

"It's a pretty good fix," he said.

The mine has room to handle more than just the vanadium waste, but Mr. Morris said Unocal has no plans to place other materials in the hole.

The vanadium waste was generated in the 1920s and early '30s by International Vanadium Corp. The land and waste pile were purchased in 1935 by Molycorp.

Mr. Anderson said concern about the material arose several years ago when researchers found the waste — a white, sandlike material — had been incorporated into the mortar used in the construction of brick homes in Monticello and used in sandboxes for children. Residents of those homes were exposed to higher-than-normal radiation levels. These homes have been cleaned up.

Molycorp was ordered to place a soil cap over the pile to discourage people from using the waste and control the release of radioactive radon gas. The company complied, but follow-up studies showed people were continuing to dig through the soil cap to get to the waste. And the site still was releasing too much radon gas.

The state ordered Molycorp to find a better disposal solution. This is when the mine-disposal idea was conceived.

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